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Journal Item

How to cite:

Watson, Sophie (2018). The Challenges of collaboration and democratic participation in turbulent and unsettled times. *Tracce Urbane: Italian Journal of Urban studies*, 3 pp. 66–74.

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.13133/2532-6562_3.14302

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The Challenges of collaboration and democratic participation in turbulent and unsettled times

Sophie Watson

Abstract

Il paper propone nuovi strumenti per pensare all'auto-organizzazione nelle città, sottoposte, a mio parere, ad una crescente instabilità e turbolenza. L'importanza di pensare l'auto-organizzazione nelle città è tanto più rilevante negli attuali contesti economici e sociali dove si assiste, in più parti del mondo, al ritiro dall'impegno e dall'investimento pubblici da parte dello Stato; fattore che ha un impatto sempre più negativo sui cittadini, in particolare sui soggetti più vulnerabili. L'auto-organizzazione è allora un'importante risorsa per il futuro se le città vogliono restare luoghi inclusivi, giusti e sensibili ai bisogni locali. Tuttavia, tale auto-organizzazione può essere veramente significativa ed efficace solo se condotta in modo collaborativo e democratico, coinvolgendo quante più persone possibili, in particolare quelle le cui voci restano spesso inascoltate. Nel far ciò, è importante riconoscere quanto tale coinvolgimento e partecipazione democratica non siano sempre consensuali; piuttosto, il conflitto è inevitabile e potenzialmente positivo, poiché le persone apprendono a riconoscere le loro differenze, spesso implicite nelle dinamiche di potere, e a negoziare soluzioni condivise.

This paper proposes new key ways to thinking about self-organisation in cities in what, I suggest, are increasingly unsettled and turbulent times. The importance of thinking about self-organisation in cities is all the more salient in the current economic and social context where in many parts of the world there is a withdrawal by the state from public involvement and expenditure, which is impacting on urban citizens, particularly those who are vulnerable, in increasing negative ways. Self-organisation is thus an important and key direction for the future, if cities are to remain inclusive, just and responsive to local needs. Yet such self-organisation can only be truly meaningful and effective if it is conducted collaboratively and democratically, involving as many people as possible, particularly those whose voices are not often heard. In so doing, it is also important to recognise that such involvement and democratic participation are not always consensual; rather conflict is inevitable and potentially positive, as people learnt to recognise their differences, which are often implicated in power, and to negotiate solutions together.

Parole chiave: Partecipazione democratica, Instabilità, Conflitto

Keywords: Democratic participation, Unsettled, Conflict

We are living in increasingly unsettled and turbulent times, where the imperative to find new ways thinking about cities, and contributing to them as activists, planners, architects and policy makers is ever more urgent. In this context, self-organisation

in cities is highly relevant. This is all the more important in many parts of the world where neo liberal economic thinking is dominant and where we see the state withdrawing from public involvement and expenditure. As a result, voluntary, non-statutory and citizen led initiatives have expanded to respond to the need for the public or social housing, welfare and community services, and other public goods that once were provided by the state. Self- organisation in cities is thus the way of the future if cities are to remain inclusive, just and responsive to local needs. What I want to suggest in this paper is that there is no meaningful self-organisation in cities without some form of collaboration and democratic participation.

Let us turn to: how can these turbulent and unsettled times in cities be characterised? First, over the last decade there has been growing inequality within cities, and across regions and countries. Rising house prices and the lack of affordable housing for people on low and middle incomes renders large numbers of people dependent on high rent levels, or forced to live in far flung suburbs or rural locations at some distance from their place of employment. At the extreme end growing numbers of homeless people are consigned to temporary shelter on city streets and underpasses, or temporary settlements, dependent on diminishing services or the kindness of strangers. Secondly, there is a growing number of people displaced from their place of origin, due to political or religious conflict, persecution or lack of resources. Many of these refugees find themselves without accommodation and employment and vulnerable to exploitation in their place of arrival. There is evidence that climate change and environmental degradation – lack of water, pollution and desertification- is contributing further to the movement of populations, a trend that is likely to continue and deteriorate over coming years. Third, we see increasing disaffection with traditional democratic governments and institutions, often expressed in hostility towards the metropolitan elites and experts, which is manifest in the rise of populist movements from the US to countries across Europe. Such a disaffection, I suggest, potentially has serious consequences for the future of democracy. To date, liberal democratic societies have been ill-prepared to confront the present challenge, often unable to grasp its nature. As a result, we see the growth of populism, right wing movements, racism, and a lack of tolerance to others

who are different. Fourth, societies are becoming increasingly complex, interconnected, unpredictable and uncertain. Such complexity and uncertainty present serious challenges for city planners and urban policy makers.

This, then, is the context for thinking about collaboration and self-organization in cities. Much of the focus on collaboration and compromise within studies of governance and partition overlooks both the reality of conflict and its potentially positive effects. Instead, there is a normative assumption of agreement and compromise, which overlooks and ignores differences and tension. Assumptions of consensus typically underpin the highly valued notions of participatory democracy. Addressing this requires particular attention to how power relationships influence the processes of governance and the role of civil society in balancing the influence of the private sector on the state. It also calls for a better understanding of conflict and collaboration as mutually reinforcing elements of an ongoing political process, where conflict is a not only unavoidable but also a necessary aspect of participation and engagement.

Chantal Mouffe's (2013, 1999) writing is helpful here. Mouffe suggests that -"deliberative democracy" is a commendable aspiration, which confronts the problems of an interest-based conception of democracy, which is inspired by economics and which is skeptical about the virtues of political participation. Theorists who are interested in developing notions of deliberative democracy, according to Mouffe (1999, p.745-6) aim to introduce questions of morality and justice into thinking about politics. This involves looking for new meanings of traditional democratic notions such as autonomy, sovereignty, and equality. However, as Mouffe argues 'their aim is to reformulate the classical idea of the public sphere, giving it a central place in the democratic project'. What matters in this notion of democracy is reason and rational argument rather than interests or an attempt respond politically to majority preferences. Habermas (1962) is one such thinker who emphasizes the importance of rational debate, typically in the public sphere of the coffee house, where deliberative democracy is based on notions of communication and people have their say - according to classical notions of democratic theory, in particular the concept of popular sovereignty. Benhabib (1996, p.70) similarly argues for a democratic theory which

attempts to bring together rationality with legitimacy seeking a 'common good' that is compatible with the sovereignty of the people (Mouffe, *ibidem*). Such a formulation is based on the assumption that common interests can be agreed through the processes of rational collective deliberation between free and equal individuals, who all have the chance to initiate debate and question the assigned topics of the conversation, and all have the right to challenge the very rules of the engagement and procedures (Benhabib, *ibidem*). But as feminists have been quick to point out this ignores the inequalities that derive from gender power differences, and the same argument could be made on the basis of other differences such as race and ethnicity, that are also embedded in inequalities of power.

Mouffe (2013), in her work, in contrast, takes seriously the dimension of power, and extends this to consider its ineradicable relation to antagonism. Instead, she suggests that the notion of a public sphere which is devoid of power and antagonism within which a rational consensus is imagined as the outcome involves the denials of some conflict as inevitable in the formation and performance of collective identities. For this reason, the traditional model of democratic politics is inadequate since it fails to recognize this. Rather, the question of power, Mouffe argues is central to the conduct of political debate, and in my view central to living with differences in the city- which are crucial to the question of self- organization. The city and its public spaces are ultimately spaces of politics and power, which act to include some social groups while excluding others. Public space can never be a neutral space where all people have equal access at all times, it is bound to be a space of contestation and conflict, even if these conflicts are sometimes resolved. But any resolution is bound to be temporary and impermanent, or maintained through constant attention to the differences of power that are constituted and played out in the public realm. Identities are necessarily formed and constituted in the spaces of the city, themselves vulnerable and precarious and shifting. This approach that I am advocating involves a displacement of the traditional relations between democracy and power, which, following Mouffe, accepts that power relations are constitutive of the social. Acceptance of this proposition opens up the question not of how to eradicate power, but rather to think about, and work with, forms of power that are compatible with democratic values

rather than destructive of them. This is to acknowledge that power relations are always present and need to be transformed in the interests of what Mouffe refers to as the project of “radical and plural democracy”. In this notion of politics, others who are different from ourselves are not conceived as some kind of enemy that needs to be destroyed, but rather as an “adversary,” whose ideas we listen to and possibly struggle against, in sometimes relations of antagonism. In this way of thinking, the objective of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions or differences through rational debate, rather, it is to mobilise these passions towards new forms of democracy.

Thus differences have to be negotiated. In the context of urban politics, I suggest that antagonistic differences to those that are different from oneself or one’s group, often occur as a result of fear of others who we don’t understand, or whose culture is not familiar- the fear of the stranger (Kristeva, 1991). This can lead urban dwellers to cut themselves off from others in gated communities, or behind walls, and refuse to engage with others who are they see as threatening. One of the challenges of self-organization in cities is thus to break down these visible and invisible boundaries that are erected between one group and another, creating soft rather than hard borders between places to open up spaces of engagement. It also involves acknowledging relations of power and addressing a sense of powerlessness that many people feel, particularly in the context of a lack of education, employment or income. It also means addressing the question of representation in the political and public spaces of the city, noticing who gets to speak and who gets to represent who. So often it is only the powerful voices that are heard.

Finally, moving on to self-organization, there are many examples of positive self-organization in cities, as this collection of papers attests. Many of these initiatives are in the less obvious and more liminal spaces of the city. This is important to emphasize since these are often overlooked in the analysis of more formal and institutional forms of organization. The US theorist Robert Putnam’s thesis in *Bowling Alone* published in the early 2000s, was influential in arguing that there we were witnessing the end of communal life. His conclusion was reached by studying organizations such as bowling clubs which had seen a substantial drop in membership. But what he ignored and overlooked are all the many places and spaces where these

take place. Ironically Emma Jackson (2017) in her ethnography of a London bowling alley, found that these were spaces which represent and bring together differences in new and exciting ways. In a similar way, geographers have mobilized the notion of community economies to make visible often marginalized and diverse economies which offer new forms of radically democratic economic organizing in diverse communities (Gibson-Graham 2006). The role of planning is crucial here. Instead of seeing the city as a clear and rational space to be planned, what is required is a recognition that planning takes place in messy and unpredictable settings that are 'complex and contentious, fluid and uncertain, historically and politically fraught'. Forester (1989) calls this "a critical pragmatism", to draw attention to the issues of difference, privilege, and power which shape the city and political engagement.

In many cities there is a long history of the re-appropriation of space and different forms of self-organization. The 1970s was a vibrant decade of urban politics of this kind across Europe, and in many other countries, where mainly young activists took over city spaces, squatting empty properties and creating new forms of communal living and working. With the rise of the women's movement, and Black movements in the US and British cities particularly, new organisations were set up in liminal spaces of the city to construct alternative forms of collective action and to respond to urban and social inequalities. Thus, we saw the growth of women's refuges, community playgrounds, city farms, cooperative housing initiatives and so on. Many of these survived, but the following decades also saw a decline in their success with the rise of the neo-liberal state across Europe, as central governments adopted punitive practices to close down these initiatives and withdraw some of the funding that supported them. In the recent period, there has been a resurgence of urban practices of re-appropriation of space" and self-organization, where in cities such as Rome empty buildings are being regenerated and new spaces of cultural production are opening up. With the growth of environmental movements over the last two decades there has been a renewed interest in creating urban gardens and making use of liminal and marginal spaces of the city which have been neglected- alongside railway lines, under bridges, adjacent to derelict buildings and so on. New public spaces are emerging, and new forms of community

and social organising are taking place. These exciting initiatives are explored in other papers in this collection, which reveal widespread social engagement of a new array of actors and communities discovering and creating new 'commons' and new ways of living. These forms of collaboration provide hope for the city as a space of self-organisation and a radical democratic politics that engages the diverse populations that now inhabit many cities of the world.

Yet it remains important to think about the questions posed earlier in this paper. How to create these spaces and organisations without excluding some groups? How can urban citizenship be constructed in such a way to be open to those that are different from those engaged in their construction? How can different groups have their interests met, and also be represented? Questions of how to engage in democratic debate that does not shut down some voices or force consensus where none exists need to be addressed. How to build political capacity amongst marginal urban actors? In this it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of urban populations rather than impose some imagined homogeneity. It is important also to recognize the complex socio-cultural and political histories of place, recognizing the specificity of each unique locality and taking this into account when constructing and imagining different futures. These are questions that need to be considered. Self-organisation in cities is here to stay. What matters is to ensure that it is conducted democratically and collaboratively to include all the diverse actors that participate and inhabit city spaces.

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